



COVER SHEET

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CHALLENGING THE CENTRE: TWO DECADES OF POLITICAL THEATRE. Edited by Steve Capelin. Brisbane: Playlab Press, 1995. Pp. 392. Aus\$39.95

The Queensland-based Popular Theatre Troupe (1974-83) and Street Arts Community Theatre Company (founded in 1983 and still operational) each played central roles in the history of Australian community theatre; today, arguably, the final chapters of that history are being written. In documenting these companies' work, Challenging The Centre chronicles a period whose impact on Australian community arts policy and practice was profound. And in tracing practitioners' responses to a generalized shift from notions of cultural disadvantage to those of cultural difference, the book charts the transition from a (loosely-organized and state-driven) community arts movement, to a current programme, also state-driven, of community cultural development. Throughout, it keeps alive tensions generated in community arts discourse by the competing demands of 'the aesthetic' and 'the functional'. As well as detailed accounts of the projects undertaken by these pioneering companies, full scripts of seven original works are included. Two other short-lived Queensland companies - Teatro Unidad y Liberacion and Order By Numbers - are documented briefly.

Even as it identifies a continuum between the two companies, the text emphasizes key differences between them. The Popular Theatre Troupe's output was forged in the great traditions of leftist agitational performance: popular, didactic, aggressive. Street Arts (many of whose original personnel were ex-members of the Troupe) continues to distinguish itself as a facilitatory organization using theatre as a tool of empowerment, bringing to otherwise disenfranchised communities access to the means of self-expression. In his introductory chapter, academic David Watt provides the book's most useful theoretical analyses, arguing that the PTT's shows were 'designed to entertain so

as to inform, to crystallise a political analysis *for* their audiences. Street Arts [...] was more concerned with the making of performance events *with* carefully defined and thoroughly explored and known communities as part of a broader strategy of community development' (31). Ultimately, these contrasting styles are represented as differences of approach rather than of ideology.

Watt's essay also situates these enterprises in their international and historical contexts. Antecedents to both companies range from the political theatres of Meyerhold, Piscator and Brecht, to more recent British experiments including Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop, Peter Cheeseman's work at Stoke-on-Trent, and John McGrath's 7:84. Detailed reference is made to Helen Crummy's ground-breaking work with the Craigmillar Festival Society in Edinburgh.

The PTT was a product of the maelstrom of cultural activism to which the counter cultures of the 1960s gave rise. The characteristic means by which the politics of those emergent cultures manifested themselves were performative, and in the community artworks of the 1970s, 'cultural and political practice achieved an uncompromised harmony of interests' (16). Both companies made it clear that community arts - with their characteristic privileging of process alongside product - demand a paradigm other than the purely aesthetic as a means of gauging 'excellence'. For both, the social functions of consultative processes were crucial, and their real measures of success were social and political as well as artistic.

Informed by a Marxist class analysis, the PTT regarded itself as a vanguard theatre of ideas, its targets including the corporate sector, conservative government and the 'military-industrial complex'. Although funded by the Community Arts and Theatre Boards of the Australia Council, the PTT's radicalism ensured that no financial assistance was forthcoming from the Queensland government. Indeed, the company comprised part of an extra-parliamentary opposition, and its activities were monitored closely by the Special Branch of the Queensland Police; two of their shows were banned.

Nevertheless, the company played a role in creating the conditions for change in the deeply conservative 'Sunshine State'.

Steve Capelin, the book's originator and editor, as well as founding member of Street Arts, details the rise and (almost) fall of Street Arts. Where the PTT was known for taking critical theatre to the shop floor, the classroom and the prison, Street Arts began making theatre in and with these communities; their work soon became particularly focused on Murri groups, as well as on communities located in lower socio-economic areas around Brisbane. In particular, major projects were undertaken in Inala, a Housing Commission suburb in Brisbane's south-west, and in Logan City. Both projects laid the foundations for ongoing community-based activity in these areas.

Continually under pressure from the Performing Arts Board to produce traditional mainstream product, the company felt itself increasingly forced to 'dance to the tune of the funding bodies' (130). Accusations were levelled regarding poor production values and message-laden scripts, but according to Capelin, 'at the heart of this tussle was the inability of the PAB to acknowledge the validity of a community cultural development approach to theatre' (147).

This is a timely, engaging and valuable text. Its contributors espouse their own work, but are also at times self-critical. The triumphs and pitfalls of collective, politically-committed work of this type are made apparent throughout.

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